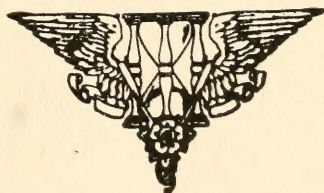


**History of The
Providence Presbyterian
Church
Up To 1846**



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PROVIDENCE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

UP TO 1846

H. E. C. Bryant

Now, that Charlotte is extending its residential section into Providence township a story of the church, for which it is named, might be interesting. In October, 1846, Rev. William Henry Foote, a well-known Virginia minister of the gospel and author of valuable history books, published his "Sketches of North Carolina," in which he wrote a chapter on Providence Presbyterian Church, one of the seven churches that sent delegates to the convention that gave the nation the Mecklenburg twentieth of May, 1775, Declaration of Independence. For seven years Mr. Foote collected information for that work, interviewed preachers, and officers of Churches and other leading citizens for facts. His story should be dependable.

The Foote book is described as "historical and biographical, and illustrative of the principles of a portion of North Carolina early settlers." In his introductory chapter the author declared: "North Carolina, in the days of colonial dependence, was the refuge of the poor and the depressed. In her borders the emigrant, the fugitive and the exile found a home."

Mr. Foote wrote two highly-prized books about Virginia churches and people; was no novice with a pen, and, for material, for his sketches he was assisted in getting it by members of the Synod of North Carolina.

About Providence Presbyterian Church, in Mecklenburg county, he wrote:

About 12 miles south of Charlotte, on one of the routes to Camden, South Carolina, you will find in a beautiful oak grove, through which the great road passes, the place of assemblage for the worship of God, of the church and the congregation of New Providence, or Providence, as it is now more commonly called. Here, as

in revolutionary times, are gathered from Sabbath to Sabbath, the inhabitants of a large section of country, which was the scene of many thrilling incidents, when Lord Cornwallis, with his royal army, tested the principles of the North Carolina Presbyterians. The name of the congregation was adopted from one in Pennsylvania, and as an acknowledgement of a kind Providence in the circumstances of the settlement of the congregation, particularly in their being unmolested by the Indians.

Owing to the distance of this country from a printing press, before and for some time after the revolution, few books or pamphlets are to be found under the name of any of the Presbyterian ministers that labored so unremittingly among the churches of this interesting population. The law of custom had decided that the destruction of manuscripts was a part of preparation for death, as solemn and as indispensable as the making of the last will and testament. Very little of the records of the thoughts of these men have been preserved from this destruction. And the unfortunate burning of some houses, together with the carelessness of those who might have rescued some things from oblivion, leaves the present generation in wondering ignorance of the trials, and energy, and the principles of those brave and excellent men.

The grave of but one minister is found in the burial-place at Providence. Step into the yard a few paces from the church, and among the chiseled names of Stitt, Potts, McKee, Rea, Patterson, McCulloch and Matthews, the oldest of which bears date of 1764, you will find the plain monument of Wallis, who served the congregation from 1792 till 1819. His mother's monument you will find in the old grave-yard of Sugar Creek, in the corner opposite to Craighead's sassafras trees. Of the previous ministers the accounts are scanty, especially as the congregation was not so fortunate as some of its neighbors in retaining its ministers for a protracted period.

Settlements in the bounds of this congregation were made about the same time as those in Sugar Creek, and Steel Creek, and Rocky River, and by the same kind

of emigrants. The first ministerial labors the settlement enjoyed, beside what they could receive from Mr. Alexander Craighead, were from the Rev. William Richardson, who was licensed by Hanover Presbytery, at a meeting at Captain Anderson's, in Cumberland, Virginia, January 25th, 1758. On the 18th of July following, at the first meeting of the Presbytery after the unions of the Synods of New York and Philadelphia, held in Cumberland, Mr. Richardson and Mr. Henry Patillo were ordained. He was appointed to attend at Rocky River on the 27th of September following to perform the installation services for Mr. Craighead, being on his way to the Cherokee (Indians). How long he remained with the Cherokees is not known. In 1761, he is reported to have left Hanover Presbytery and joined the Presbytery in South Carolina, not in connection with the Synod. In 1762, the Presbytery sustained his reasons for joining that Presbytery without dismissal from his own, with which he was in regular connection.

Mr. Richardson was the maternal uncle of the famous William Richardson Davie, so noted in the Southern War, adopted him as his son, superintended his education, and made him heir of an estate, every shilling of which Davie expended in equipping corps of which he was made major in 1780. How long he preached in Providence is not known. His residence was in South Carolina.

The first elders in the (Providence) church were: Andrew Rea, Archibald Crockett, Joshua Ramsey and Aaron Howie. For some time previous to the organization in 1765, there had been but one place acknowledged as the place of worship by the people of this congregation, and that is the grove where the meeting-house now stands, in the shade of whose trees the first public worship was celebrated until a house was built.

In 1766, there is a notice on the records of the Synod of "a call for settement among them, from Steel Creek and Providence." About that time Mr. Robert Henry, who gathered the church on Cub Creek, Vir-

ginia, resolved, after ministering to that charge for a number of years, to leave them; and an engagement was made for his services in these two congregations. By the records of Hanover Presbytery, it appears he was dismissed from Cub Creek in 1766, and his death is reported to the Presbytery as having taken place May 8th, 1767.

The following articles between Providence and Clear Creek (now called Philadelphia) have been preserved by William Queary: "Whereas, the representation of both congregations doth unanimously agree among themselves, in the names of both the aforesaid congregations, to stand and abide by each other from time to time through all difficulties, in order to obtain the labors of a gospel minister, that is to say, the one half of his labors to go to one congregation, and the other to the other. And for a true and sincere union for the truth of the aforesaid articles, the representation of both congregations hath hereunto subscribed their names January 27th, 1770: New Providence-John Ramsey, James Linn, John Hagens, James Houston, Andrew Rea (Reah), James Draffen, James Johnston, James Teate, Thomas Black, Robert Stewart; for Clear Creek-Adam Alexander, Matthew Stewart, John Queary, Michael Liggett, and John Ford."

Two of the above names appear in the list of (the signers) of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, viz:- Adam Alexander and John Queary, which shows that the men were public spirited men, that formed the representation. But we have no memoranda now to inform us of the effects of this union upon the religious concerns of the congregation. Neither have we any detailed account of the ecclesiastic concerns of the congregation during the arduous struggle of the Revolution. It is known that Thomas Reese preached in Mecklenburg for some time when the other congregations were generally supplied with some part of the services of a minister; and that from his pen some of the effective papers that involved the inhabitants of Mecklenburg; he is supposed to have given some part of his time to Providence. Mr. McRee came from Steel

Creek to supply the pulpit, for some time, as he says he often rode from home to preach for them on the Sabbath. Mr. Archibald came over from Rocky River and Poplar Tent, and supplied them for a season. The Rev. David Barr labored in the bounds for some time, but did not make it his permanent residence.

The congregation, lying on the route of the armies moving north or south, suffered its full share in the plunderings which, by the account of the British historians, were severe, at the time Cornwallis moved on to Charlotte. The night before he approached that village, he encamped in Providence, on the ground occupied by Colonel Davie, with the few American forces that behaved so nobly when united to the few militia and volunteers that joined them in Charlotte, "keeping in check the whole British army." The greatest trial in the war was upon those neighborhoods and sections of the country subjected to the plunderings of the army of the king. It was not a sudden and great danger, or even bloodshed, in a good cause, by assault or regular battle, in which the excitement of the occasion carries the spirit triumphant through. But an annoyance in the smaller matters of a property, and the private concerns; a taking away of the comforts of domestic life; a harrassing of defenseless females and helpless age and children; and this continued from day to day, when all the enthusiasm of excitement had spent its force; and principle itself could scarce sustain the accumulated weight of numberless petty privations, crowned as they sometimes were with conflagration and butchery, that entailed exile or poverty. It is a matter of admiration that under the pressure of these evils so few of the inhabitants in Mecklenburg ever thought of deserting the cause of liberty, or of "taking protection", though many families saw their wealth swept with a merciless hand. And the few that yielded in the trial were subjects of commiseration rather than severe and harsh denunciation.

James Wallis, who was the first minister that gave protracted service in Providence, spent his ministerial life in the congregation. He was born in 1762, in Sugar

Creek, son of Ezekiel Wallis. His early education was at Liberty Hall in Charlotte; and his college course was completed at Winsborough, South Carolina, under Dr. Barr. He was ordained pastor in 1792, by the Presbytery of Orange, and never changed his congregation.

Soon after entering upon his office in this congregation, commenced a new and till then unknown conflict about the Bible. That the Presbyterian ministers south of Yadkin had been true patriots, no man in the country, or in the British army, pretended to deny. Their names were not unknown in the camp; and the pulpits of the seven churches poured forth the highest intellectual efforts in discussing the rights of man, and sustaining the sinking spirits of the distressed country, by the abounding consolations of the word of God. The minister and his congregation prayed-the father and the family prayed-the soldier in his tent, and in the woods, prayed-and the commander at the head of the forces often commenced the march with prayer. And it was no idle form of prayer, but a pouring out of the heart to God Almighty for his protection in the struggle for liberty and truth.

Dr. Robinson of Poplar Tent, used to tell an anecdote of an old gentleman, by the name of Alexander, in one of the neighboring congregations, that did not think of neglecting his religious duties though called into camp as a soldier. Being sent out to intercept some Tories, very early one morning, when his post was assigned to him with the general orders to wait their near approach and take sure aim he took the opportunity for a few moments of devotion. Taking off his hat he knelt down in the attitude of a worshipper; upon the near approach of the enemy he resumed his post and waited the signal. The unhappy Tory that encountered the shot of his rifle fell dead. The whole party of Tories were soon dispersed or taken. As, in the time of Cromwell, the praying soldiers did not run or play the coward.

When the war was over, then came the other contest of fearful import, whose influence was felt every-

where but nowhere in Carolina with more violence than in Mecklenburg county. The authority of the king had been discussed and set aside; the battle between the crown and the people had been fought and won by the people. Then came the discussion about the dominion of conscience-what should govern, conscience, philosophy or the Bible? Should philosophy dictate to the Bible, or the Bible to all the world? The authority of the Bible underwent a sifting discussion, such as Carolina had never seen, and may never see again. From the nature of the case that discussion was vehement in Mecklenburg, and from accidental circumstances embittered in Providence. A debating society-and debating societies for political purposes were common in those days-was found in the region of country embracing Sugar Creek, Steel Creek and Providence, and furnished with a circulating library, replete with infidel philosophy and infidel sentiments on religion and morality. Everything of a religious nature was called in question and discussed; and the standard of opposition was raised with a boldness becoming a better cause. Caldwell (Rev. S. C. Caldwell) of Sugar Creek and Wallis of Providence, brothers in the ministry, and sons-in-law of John McKnitt Alexander, were in the hottest of the battle, as infidelity is never so outrageous as when it takes its seat, or strives to take it, in a Christian community.

With different natural temperament, they met the strife like courageous, men: Caldwell cool, clear and amiable, and loved where he could not convince; Wallis, clear, strong, ardent, and more dreaded though less loved; both unfaltering, and unwearied and honored. Caldwell left politics to other hands, and preached the gospel; Wallis proclaimed the great principles of Democracy as part of his creed; and asserted, with them, the unlimited control of the word of God in all matters pertaining to conscience, whether public or private. He prepared a pamphlet in which were condensed the arguments of Watson, Paley and Leslie and, circulated it among his people and through the country. A pamphlet as well calculated to produce the effect designed-the ex-

hibition of the evidences of revelation in contradiction to all infidel notions has seldom been issued from the press. A reprint would be advantageous where discussion on the subject of revelation is called for.

The debating society embraced wealth and talent, and for a time maintained the contest with spirit. Emigration to Tennessee, in which the library was carried across the mountains, and the great revival of 1802 broke it up.

While this discussion was going on, and men were arguing for and against the Bible and excited and sometimes angry feelings, another cause of unhappiness arose. Mr. Wallis had occasion to be absent a few Sabbaths, and obtained the favor of Rev. William C. Davis, to supply his pulpit one Sabbath. Mr. Davis, on the day of his supply, made use of the version of Psalms by Watts. As the congregation had never agreed to introduce this version, and as many families were opposed to their use in public worship, offense was taken; and the blame was thrown on Mr. Wallis as having been privy to the matter. The discontented withdrew, and for a time worshipped in a building about three hundred yards from the old stand; this, however, was soon abandoned, and the seceding families now worship at Sardis, about seven miles distant; the subject of Psalmody being the principal matter of division.

The great revival of 1802 and onward had a happy influence on the congregation. A campmeeting was held within their bounds, commencing Friday, March 23rd, at which it was supposed from five to six thousand persons were present. To accommodate this great assemblage, after a sermon at the public stand in the centre, about 9 o'clock, worship was continued at five different places. For the first three days little impression was made, and the opinion that "all was the work of man, and the effects of the power of oratory", which had been circulated by those inclined to believe in the infidel notions, was gaining ground. But on Sabbath night a great impression was visible, and before the close of the meeting a large number were hopeful

converts; and among these were some that had been prominent in their unbelief. There are some living today who were converts at that meeting, whose lives have been those of consistent Christians.

Mr. Wallis taught a classical school many years. The deep conviction, that purity of religion and morals could not long survive the introduction of an ignorant ministry into the pulpit, urged on the ministers of the Presbyterian church to unremitting efforts to establish and keep alive high schools. In these efforts they received the aid of intelligent laymen, who were impelled by the full belief, that the welfare of the body politic is for ever indissolubly united with mental cultivation and the correct training of the moral principles. Long has the academy stood near Providence Church, and there may it long stand. The church and the school-house were inseperable in the early Presbyterian settlements. Mr. Wallis taught school successfully and his successors have kept the doors open for the youth of Mecklenburg; and when the actors of the present generation have passed from the stage, the record will say of many of them, that their education was commenced, and of others, that it was finished there. It does not appear that Mr. Wallis was driven to school-keeping by poverty of his means; but from the necessity of the country at large, and his congregation in particular.

Mr. Wallis was for some time a member of the board of trustees of the University. This shows the estimation in which he was held by his political friends, when there were so many Presbyterian ministers of eminence as teachers, from whom to choose.

Mr. Wallis was of stature rather below the middling height, small in person, quick in his motions, and elastic in his movements; excitable in his temper, warm in his attachments, ardent, in his delivery of sermons; and not subject to fear. His congregation flourished under his ministry. He finished his course in the year 1819, in the 57th year of his age, and the 27th of his ministry.

In the year 1823, the Rev. Samuel Williamson was

called and settled as pastor; in this office he continued till his removal to the presidency of Davidson College in the year 1840. During his ministry, about the year 1831, those members of Providence living on the north side of McAlpine's Creek, from four to ten miles from Providence Church with a few other families, were organized as a separate church and congregation by the name of Sharon, to which a part of the labors of the pastor, Mr. Williamson, was given.

Providence abounds in localities of revolutionary interest. A complete history of the southern war will bring to notice many places now fast passing even from traditional remembrance.

Another historian, Rev. A. J. McKelway, ghost writer for D. A. Tompkins, who published a history of Mecklenburg county in 1903, had this to say of Providence Church: "During the war, especially in 1780 and 1781, churches were greatly disturbed. After peace was declared, the doctrines of the French skeptics began to be discussed. A society composed of prominent church members was formed for the purpose of considering the new theories, and some men openly avowed disbelief in all things. For ten years the power of the society grew, and the dissensions attracted much attention, but the whole movement was combatted from the first by all the ministers. Efforts to check the growth of the skepticism were unavailing, and the churches suffered much until the great rival at Providence in 1802, when many of the infidels were converted."

At the time Mr. McKelway did this writing for Mr. Tompkins he was editor of the *The Presbyterian Standard*.

Later as the War Between States was coming a Negro slave, Sam Parks, complained that the galleries of Providence Church for colored members were uncomfortable, and a new building should be erected. Dr. Jethro Rumple, who afterwards wrote a valuable history of Rowan county, was pastor of Providence at that time.

From there he went to Salisbury where he served for years, and became one of the Presbyterian leaders in the State. Several years before his death Dr. Rumble told the Sam Parks story to a Charlotte minister. He said the present house of worship at Providence was built while he was there. The elders at that time were Messrs Billy Rea, Morrison Stitt, William McKee, E. C. Kuykendal, Hugh M. Parks and Colonel Dunn. The old gallery was described as dingy, and too close to the roof. The stairway to it ran up from the outside. At that time the church had 166 members, including 56 Negroes. Sam Parks appealed to Dr. Rumble, and Dr. Rumble appealed to the elders. The new building was erected.

This little book I give in remembrance of my mother, Julia Parks Bryant, and her pioneer ancestors, including Parkses, Stitts, Sharps, Hills, Pottses, Houstons, Ezzells, Cunninghams, Davises, Reas, McCullochs, Kerrs, Coffeys, Robinsons, and Howays, whose remains are buried in the graveyard of the old church. My father, Henry Bryant, who was born in Greene County, and his half sister, Mrs. Thomas L. Vail, are among these of that historic city of the dead. Through Mrs. Vail I am related to the members of Jule Grier family. Nearby the graves of those mentioned are those of Rev. James Wallis (formerly Wallace), Downses, Morrisons, McKees, Reids, Springes, Curetons, Walkups, Olivers, Howards, Dunns, Stephenson's, Query's, Wilsons, Orrs, Polks, Matthewses, Howies,, Caldwell's, Ormands, Alexanders, Flennikens, Barnett's, Baxters, Blakeney's, McDowell's, Rosses, Gribbles, McLaughlins, Nelsons and others, whose resting places are not marked. All of these old families are still well represented in North Carolina and other States. While some of these pioneers were English a large majority of them were Scotch-Irish, coming from the North of Ireland, through Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia to the South. Many of their members helped to establish Providence Presbyterian Church, in the seventeen sixties, and maintain it for generations.

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